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In Honduras, Military Calls the Key Shots

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Second of Three Articles

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LA PAZ, Honduras—From the marble chapel built by President Roberto Suazo Cordova atop a hillside on the edge of town, it is only a few minutes' walk down newly paved streets to where a 30,000-seat stadium is rising alongside Roberto Suazo Cordova Boulevard.

From there, it is another short stroll to Roberto Suazo Cordova Hospital, with Suazo Cordova's bust in the driveway, or back through town to Guillermo Suazo Cordova Park, named for Roberto's brother, perhaps by way of the new town hall named after Roberto Suazo Cordova, served by Roberto Suazo Cordova Avenue.

But the most interesting site in this little farming town is the pedestal that has risen in the center of a new intersection. The concrete is dry and ready to receive a statue, although townspeople say no one knows whose image will end up there. Asked whether it might be that of Suazo Cordova, they just smile.

Statue or not, the 56-year-old portly country doctor has transformed his home town from a backwater village to a Third World monument since he assumed the presidency in January 1982. Mayor Manuel de Jesus Chevez says Suazo Cordova has

brought La Paz, a town of 5,000, new schools, streets, government offices, water systems, street lights, a market, a community center and, among still other things, the new stadium that local residents are betting will have Suazo Cordova in its name.

Despite the many signs here of Suazo's exalted position as his impoverished nation's president, it is the makeup of military leadership and its links to the United States that remain decisive for Honduran foreign policy and internal security.

At the pinnacle of Honduras' military establishment is Gen. Walter Lopez, 44, a former Air Force pilot and hero of the 1969 "soccer war" with El Salvador. He replaced the armed forces commander who for two

years embraced Reagan administration policies as his own, Gustavo Alvarez.

Alvarez was removed from power at gunpoint by younger officers disgruntled with his high-handed style and worried that purely Honduran interests would be eclipsed by regional U.S. interests.

U.S. diplomats have said that Alvarez's ouster last March 31 caught them by surprise. Perhaps more important in the long run, it also returned military leadership from Alvarez's one-man rule to collegial decision-making, traditional in the Honduran armed forces, and altered relationships between the U.S. Embassy and the Honduran officer corps.

"They [U.S. officials] still have access, of course, but it is not the same as it was under Alvarez," said a Honduran source well-informed on military matters. "There is a sort of tension now."

Under the 1982 constitution, Suazo—the first popularly elected Honduran president since Ramon Villeda Morales was overthrown by the Army in 1963—became commander in chief of the armed forces as well as head of the civilian government. In practice, however, the Army has retained its traditional control over military affairs and shares power with the president in security matters within limits set by the Army's sense of constitutional rule.

A Honduran source with years of experience with the military said an important consideration for Honduran officers is a widely shared sentiment that the military as an institution is ultimately responsible for the country and must preserve power as part of that mission.

A Honduran colonel discussing possible transfer of internal security from the military to civilian government said, for example, that the Army would make that decision only when and if it felt that civilian

politicians were mature enough to be entrusted with the task. The idea, discussed last spring, has been dropped.

Against this background, according to U.S. and Honduran sources,

the key elements of Honduran foreign policy during the past several years have reflected decisions in which the Army was the major actor, even though the policies may have been carried out by the civilian government.

Foreign Minister Edgardo Paz Barnica, for example, made repeated declarations in 1982 and 1983 that Honduras was not, as Nicaragua charged, offering refuge and help to anti-Sandinista guerrillas. His words were largely ignored by those informed about Alvarez's extensive cooperation with the guerrillas and CIA agents who were then financing and advising them in Tegucigalpa and border outposts.

Paz Barnica's recent declaration that a Miskito Indian rebel leader, Steadman Fagoth, would be expelled from the country was followed by prompt action by military security forces, indicating that the foreign minister was acting in concert with the military. But his simultaneous threat that all Nicaraguan rebels would be thrown out as well if they violated Honduran law has gone without effect, indicating that he got ahead of military policy.

The arrangement between civilian and military authorities here is reflected in the composition of the National Security Council, the highest decision-making body in security or foreign affairs. Suazo presides over it, seconded by his minister of the presidency, Paz Barnica from the Foreign Ministry and the minister of the interior, for a total of four civilian officials. They are joined by Lopez, the head of the joint chiefs of staff, and the commanders of the Army, Navy, Air Force and Public Security Forces, giving the military a built-in 6-4 majority.

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According to Honduran and U.S. sources, however, broad policy lines on security affairs first are settled in the Superior Armed Forces Council, the collegial body revived by Lopez after Alvarez was ousted and shipped off to Miami. Lopez heads the council, which also includes his general staff and commanders of the Army's major garrisons and branches.

Col. Cesar Elvir Sierra, the Army spokesman, said the council in-

cludes between 30 and 40 officers, depending on the subject under discussion, and most hold the rank of lieutenant colonel or higher. By law, the council meets four times a year, he added, but it gathers more often as needed.

Interplay between groups of officers within the council has been the major factor in determining Honduran policies toward the United States and the anti-Sandinista rebels since Lopez took over as commander, according to diplomatic and Honduran sources who have followed the changes.

Reviving the military council's role in setting policy has provided a forum for a group of middle-ranking officers long unhappy with Alvarez's enthusiasm for U.S. goals but shut out of command decisions by his autocratic management, they added. Their relative influence with senior officers on the council, more inclined toward U.S. policy, is likely to affect where Honduras heads in the months ahead.

Suazo, meanwhile, has fascinated and infuriated Honduran political circles with skillful backroom maneuvers that have made him master of the country's party politics if not its foreign policy. His enemies say he has gone so far as to pick candidates for both major parties in next November's elections.

"Oh, yes, Suazino is just having a great time," complained an opposition leader whose National Party has been split by Suazo's Liberal Party inroads.

"Everything that happens [in party infighting] does not flow from the legal order of candidate selection, but from the will of Dr. Roberto Suazo Cordova," chorused a lawyer and National Party official.

But some Honduran and foreign observers say Suazo's flair for po-

litical manipulation has overtaken his sense of responsibility for running the government. Time passed in organizing and wheedling for party gains could better be spent on the backward Honduran economy or the country's role in the Central American crisis, they complain, or in consolidating the first elected Honduran government after two decades of military rule.

The United States should be making the same complaints, these critics say, because the Reagan administration has held up Honduras as an example of democracy in the face of Nicaragua's Marxist-led Sandinista government.

On one occasion, at least, U.S. diplomats did complain. When the FBI uncovered a plot to assassinate

Suazo that was being hatched in Miami, the president's office immediately sought to blame opposition political figures, drawing some telephone calls from the U.S. Embassy urging restraint.

"Those who have a little common sense realize that the electoral system here is not important for Honduras alone, but for the entire region," said one of Suazo's moderate critics. "Why? Because we are faced with a real challenge from Nicaragua."

Efrain Diaz Arrivillaga, the lone Christian Democrat in the National Congress and a frequent dissenter from government policies, says that Suazo commands loyalty from opposition politicians through pork-barrel favors such as he demonstrated to an unusual degree here in La Paz.

"He knows they all have a price," Diaz said. "These are the political values of our society, and this is what it is trying to confirm. His way of making politics is something we have to overcome."

Tegucigalpa was abuzz several months ago with talk that Suazo might try to extend his four-year mandate or run for a second term next November in spite of constitutional provisions limiting him to four years in office.

The word for it was *continuismo*. It seemed for a while like such a real possibility that opposition leaders were regaling political salons

with references to the traditional Honduran method for resolving political disputes: a military coup d'etat.

That was until armed forces com-

mander Lopez raised the issue publicly in his New Year's speech. In pointed language, Lopez told the nation that there would be neither *continuismo* nor a coup as long as he was in charge.

Lopez's speech contradicted Martine Rodriguez, a sorceress from a village near here who in December met with the president for half an hour in the pink presidential palace.

Although the self-proclaimed witch is a specialist in love potions, she obliged the president by declaring to the Honduran press on her way out that he should remain in office because the country needs him.

"For my old guy," she added, according to news reports, "I wish all kinds of happiness and that he have the virility to hold up, because the people think highly of him. Although some say they don't like him, inside they are saying yes."

For residents of La Paz, the sorceress and her predictions seem like good fun. Witchcraft is a tradition around here, although townspeople say most people do not believe in it any more. As for Suazo, he was trained as a medical doctor in Guatemala and knows as much about potions as the next man.

As for the marble chapel that looks over La Paz, it was built in honor of Our Lady of Perpetual Help. It houses a reproduction of an old icon and a not-so-old statue, both depicting the Virgin and Christ child with an angel on either side.

The reproduction is a gift from the government of Spain. According to a diplomat involved in the donation, Suazo first asked the Spaniards for a historical statue of Our Lady of Perpetual Help. After investigation, they found that no such statue exists and that the devotion instead centers around such reproductions of a long-lost icon.

A fugitive from Spanish justice involved in a financial scandal got wind of Suazo's search, however, and had a statue made for the pres-

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ident, diplomats say. Suazo had the statue carried around Tegucigalpa by helicopter to bless the capital before moving it to a permanent place behind the altar at the marble chapel here, they recall. In a display of gratitude, these diplomats add, Suazo arranged for the fugitive to travel on a Honduran diplomatic passport. Ever since its arrival, the statue has been known everywhere but in La Paz as "Our Lady of the Passport."

Next: Guerrillas vs. Sandinistas

HONDURAS AT A GLANCE

■ **POPULATION:** 4.3 million (1983 estimate), predominantly mestizo, or Hispano-Indian. More than 75 percent of Hondurans live in rural areas.

■ **ECONOMY:** Chiefly agricultural; main exports are bananas and coffee. Two U.S. companies, Standard Fruit and United Brands (formerly United Fruit), have been a dominant force since the late 1800s. The companies employ more than 18,000 Hondurans, directly or indirectly, and contribute about \$140 million to the economy.

■ **HISTORY:** The area was inhabited since before Christian times, and Mayan civilization once flourished. The Spanish conquest began in 1524, and the country was ruled by Spain until 1821. Decades of instability followed, as the country had 67 different heads of state between 1855 and 1932. A constitutional president installed in 1957 was ousted in 1963. A series of military governments followed until the election of Roberto Suazo Cordova in 1981.

■ **GOVERNMENT:** 1982 constitution provides for directly elected president and unicameral National Congress.



BY LARRY FOGEL—THE WASHINGTON POST